Vanuatu denies it is about to sign a security deal with China as Australia works to ink its own pact

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Jotham Napat and Anthony Albanese are yet to formalise the Nakamal Agreement between the two countries despite months of negotiations. (ABC News: Lilyrose Weiwei, file)

In short:

Vanuatu's prime minister has dismissed reports his country is on the verge of signing a security agreement with China.

Jotham Napat said reports suggesting as such were "untrue" before adding that his country's relationships "were not exclusive".

Australia's Pacific Minister Pat Conroy would not confirm if the federal government has concerns over Vanuatu's potential deal with China.

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Vanuatu has furiously denied that it is on the cusp of signing a security pact with China and warned that it will not be "dictated to" by Australia in a row which threatens to disrupt delicately poised negotiations for the landmark Nakamal Agreement.

Multiple sources have confirmed that China and Vanuatu have spent months discussing a comprehensive new pact called the Namele Agreement.

In Vanuatu, the Namele leaf is a sacred symbol of peace and authority used to enforce kastom or customary laws.

On Tuesday morning the Vanuatu newspaper the Daily Post reported that Australian officials in Port Vila were concerned the deal could have security elements, quoting a source who said it might "affect agreements with Australia" and undermine Vanuatu's push to make Canberra ease visa restrictions.

But later that day Vanuatu's Prime Minister Jotham Napat issued a forceful statement calling the report "grossly misguided and inaccurate" and insisting the proposed agreement was a "comprehensive development cooperation agreement" not a security pact.

He also took a thinly veiled swipe at Australia saying that "Vanuatu will decide what is good for Vanuatu. We will not be dictated to."

> "Our foreign policy is guided by our national interests, not by external speculation or pressure," Mr Napat said.

"Suggestions that our partnerships could affect visa arrangements or other bilateral matters are unhelpful and not a cultural reflection of Nakamal values.

"Vanuatu's relationships are not exclusive."

Airing of concerns 'serious' amid negotiations

The dispute risks poisoning the atmosphere between Australia and Vanuatu just as the two countries prepare to finalise protracted and sometimes difficult negotiations over the Nakamal Agreement — a landmark security and development pact between the two countries.

Last week Vanuatu's Climate Minister Ralph Regenvanu said the government was on the "cusp" of finally signing the deal, almost eight months after it was given initial approval on the summit of Mt Yasur.

Senior ministers from Australia and Vanuatu initialled the Nakamal Agreement at the top of Mount Yasur, an active volcano on the island of Tanna, in August last year. (ABC News: Lilyrose Weiwei)

One diplomat in Vanuatu from a third country said the fact Australian officials still pressed ahead with raising public concerns about the pact with China, albeit by an anonymous leak to a newspaper, showed they must have "serious" concerns that it would have security implications.

The ABC has been told that Australia is not opposed to Vanuatu building up its economic links with China, but wants to ensure that the Namele pact is not a security agreement which might undermine Nakamal, or threaten Australia's interests.

The Pacific Minister Pat Conroy would not confirm if Australia had concerns, or say whether officials in Vanuatu had tried to use the Namele agreement as leverage to secure a better deal in negotiations on the Nakamal Agreement.

But he said Australia was in a "daily context" with unnamed other countries throughout the Pacific.

"We've been very honest with the Australian public that we're in a permanent state of contest for influence in the Pacific," Mr Conroy said.

"That's why we've put so much resources and so much ministerial energy into this area."

Wong says Australia the 'architect' in the region

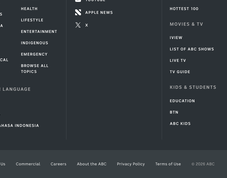
The foreign minister has used a major speech to celebrate the government's string of security agreements, saying Labor has helped build a region more stable and less deferential to authoritarian powers like Russia and China.

Chinese influence in region monitored closely

Australia has also been closely monitoring meetings between the Chinese government and Vanuatu government ministers, including Interior Affairs Minister Andrew Napuat, who went to a major summit on digital technology in Hong Kong last week.

Mr Napat said the conference was focused on "addressing challenges in cyber security, digital transformation, and emerging technologies" and a senior government source in Vanuatu denied outright that any agreements had been signed with China during his trip.

The Chinese embassy in Vanuatu also said the claim of a security agreement was "untrue" and that "China-aid-to-cooperation focuses on infrastructure development and capacity building".



China has loaned money to Vanuatu financing new roads for its outer islands in recent years. (Facebook: China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, file)

Mr Napat also insisted the discussions around finalising the Nakamal Agreement with Australia were "not at all linked to China".

"Officials are continuing close engagement to ensure any agreement with any partner reflects Vanuatu's interests as high priority in ensuring its longevity," he said.

The agreement hit the rocks just before it was due to be signed in Port Vila by prime ministers Anthony Albanese and Jotham Napat in September, with Vanuatu deciding it could not endorse language aimed at limiting China's security presence in the Pacific.

That included a section emphasising that Pacific nations should have clear responsibility for security matters in this region, and another section which was designed to limit foreign investment in critical infrastructure in Vanuatu.

Even before this dispute there has been evidence of tensions between the two sides.

Multiple sources in Vanuatu have said Australian diplomats had deliberately kept an unusually low profile in recent weeks, a move one official said was "strange" and noticeable".

Mr Conroy would not be drawn on when the Nakamal Agreement was set to be signed.

"We've had very productive conversations but you'll hear about an announcement when we make it," he said.

Shadow Foreign Minister Ted O'Brien said Australia was "deeply invested in its relationship with Vanuatu" and the government needed to make it built a "strong, respectful and enduring partnership".

"The Albanese government has questions to answer here," Mr O'Brien said.

"What is the status of the Nakamal Agreement? And what steps are being taken to encourage its finalisation?

"This is looking like yet another diplomatic blunder on the part of the Albanese government and given the strategic importance of this relationship I expect Labor will exhaust every effort to improve the situation."

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